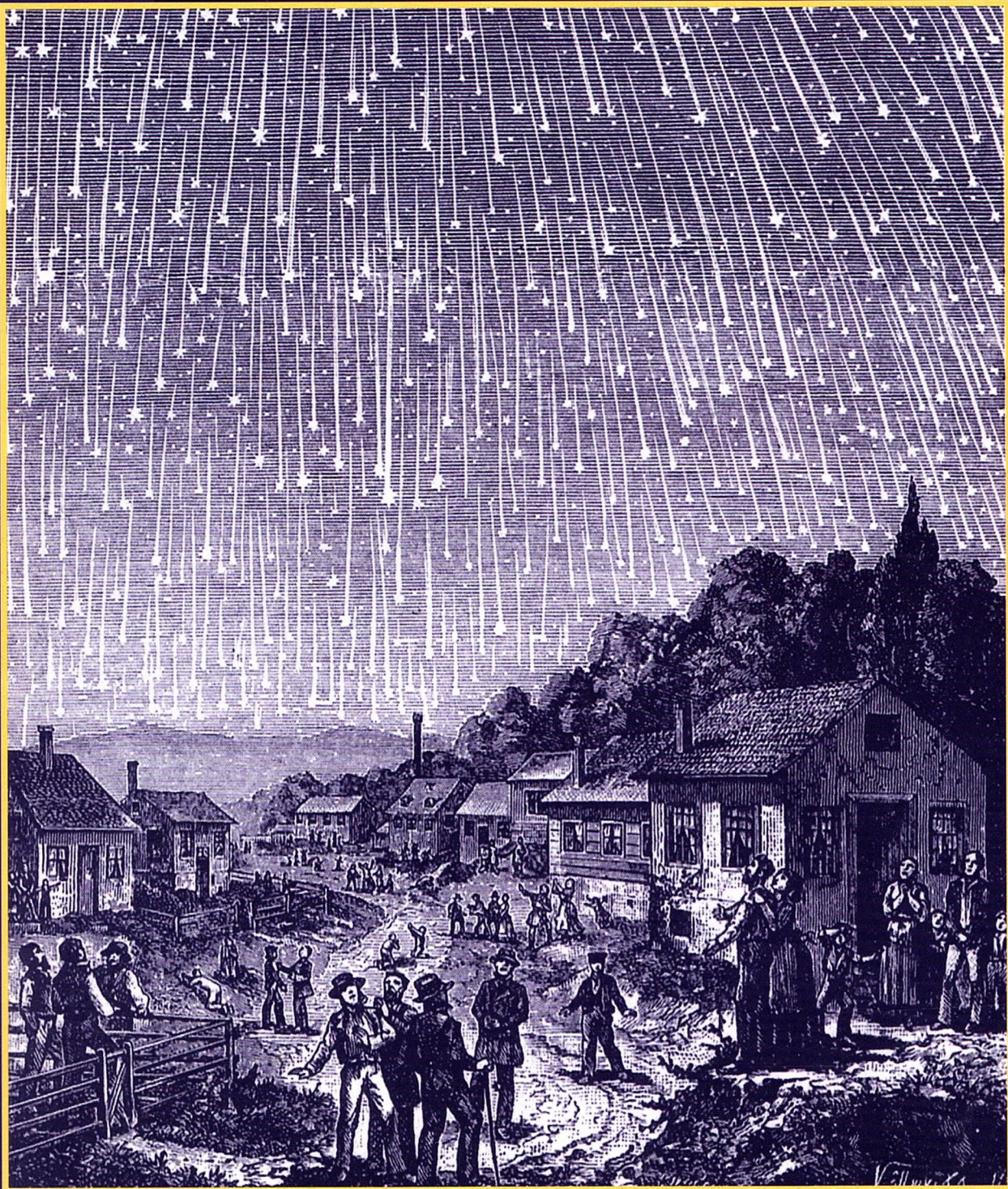


ALABAMA HERITAGE



THE CLARK BUILDING, 1908

4TH AVENUE NORTH AND 20TH STREET
BIRMINGHAM

THE EXPERIENCES OF THE EIGHTY-FOUR-MEMBER LAW FIRM Lightfoot, Franklin, & White, who renovated the Clark Building in Birmingham, have mirrored those of Balch & Bingham in Montgomery: it was the best public-relations effort, they say, they could have undertaken. Initially, however, the value of tackling such a project was not apparent to the firm's partners. When they were approached by interior designer Bob Moody and developer John Lauriello, the lawyers had an immediate and direct reaction: "Are you crazy?" they said. They also admit to being bemused as they were led (after a strategic couple of drinks) through the building by Moody and Lauriello, who kept making admiring comments about the brickwork, the building's potential, and its usable space. Johnny Johnson, a member of the firm's properties committee, remembers telling the two, "Frankly, you have lost your minds."

The single most important factor in changing Johnson's mind was a watercolor cross-section of the building prepared by Bob Moody, which illustrated the structure's different levels and demonstrated how they would work together after renovation. Moody's rendering revealed the entire plan—where the stairs would go, where the conference rooms and offices would be housed, where support staff would be located, and where the voluminous files generated by a law firm would be stored. The library, in Moody's plan, fit easily into the basement area that once housed a tea room. A conference room could be situated in Bob Cain's old Cainbreak nightclub, a landmark to thousands of University of Alabama and Auburn footballs fans.

The other element that made the project practical was the cost. As Mac Moorer, one of the principals, put it, "We worked the numbers until we found that the mortgage payments would cost us the same as leasing quarters in top-flight commercial space in this neighborhood. Plus, in fifteen years, we will own the building debt-free, and that's a better investment of our housing dollar."

The reputations of Bob Moody and John Lauriello were also reassuring to the law partners as they considered

taking this huge step. Moody had specialized in commercial work for some thirty years, designing interior and exterior spaces for a variety of businesses, while Lauriello, of Southpace Properties, had renovated at least forty buildings in the center of the city over the past fifteen years. "We would never have undertaken this project without the expertise of Bob and John," says Moorer.

Moody returns the compliment in speaking of his client. "This is the most satisfying project I've ever done, and I've done lots of projects. For one thing, I've had my eye on the building for twenty years or better. It came within two weeks of being demolished by the city because the neighbors were complaining about it being such an eyesore." He also enjoyed working with the lawyers. "Anything I wanted to do, they just said okay. They're defense lawyers, you know," Moody adds with a twinkle. "That means they're a different breed from other lawyers."

A Birmingham landmark for almost a century, the Clark Building has touched the lives of generations of residents, a fair number of whom wandered in to ask questions as work on the building progressed. People wanted to know what was going on and to reminisce with whoever was available about their memories of the building. There was much to remember. The structure had been built by real estate entrepreneur "General" Louis Clark, a native of Mobile, who had begun excavations on the site in 1905 in anticipation of selling it to a family interested in developing a department store. When the family—who also owned a General Motors automobile dealership—selected another site, Clark was left with a hole in the ground, and he was so furious, it was said, that he never drove another General Motors car. Nonetheless, in 1908 he built the Clark Building.

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Left: The Clark Building, 1908, now the handsome offices of Lightfoot, Franklin & White, is once again a vital part of downtown Birmingham. (Photograph by Robin McDonald) Top: The structure has housed a parade of establishments over the years, including a chiropractor, as pictured here. Above: The Clark Building before 1960s additions to the exterior were removed. (Both courtesy Lightfoot, Franklin & White)

Designed by architect Harry B. Wheelock, the building was constructed of heart-pine timbers purchased second-hand from a fertilizer factory, and faced with brick.

A parade of establishments has occupied the building over the years—Smith and Hardwick Bookstore, Café Italiano, The Rathskeller, T.C.'s (operated by Tommy

Charles), Remington Shaver, and the large operation most people remember, Schwobilt, Suits of the South.

This highly visible project in downtown Birmingham has been so successful that other law firms and developers are considering renovating buildings in the city's center. Again, it is the ripple effect at work.